

Sociology of Folklife: Language, Culture and Society in Tribal North-East India

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Abstract

The vicinity of North-East India provides a classic case of how the tribes, once a majority in this province, were slowly reduced to a minority and facing the threat of being dispossessed of their land, language and culture. Even they are confronting each other and practising human slavery which is prevalent in their social life. Actually, the history of Brahmaputra valley is replete with several short- and long-term reigns on the land by invaders, from the east as well as from the west. How the tribal life was socially influenced by these invasions? What were the dimensions and directions of cultural change? How far these tribal folks adept themselves to survive and consolidate in this changing scenario? This short article tries to explore that story of cultural history and folklife through the eye of time and attempt to discover the politico-civilizational effect on indigenous praxis.

Important Terms: Pre-Ahoms and Ahom phase, kinship relation, taboo, tattoo, paik system, Mughal invasion, British domination, folklife, folk-economy, ethnic conflicts, etc.

Introduction:

North-East Indian tribes, with a wide range of diversity even within the groups themselves, contain over two hundred ethnic groups and dialects. When all of them are clubbed under the "North-East" tag, it tends to represent a "one shoe fits all" approach for this extremely diverse region. It is a social fact that each group has its own distinct dialect but most of them have no script of their own. Consequently, folktales containing local concepts flowing from generation to generation mould their everyday life. Following kinship, they organize social relations; and by following rituals, they reinforce cultural values.

In Indian context a tribe is best understood not by the discrete criteria, but rather by the position of a population vis-à-vis dominant

ideologies and cultural patterns. Culture is a living organism, a unified thing of tangible and intangible elements, a natural and spontaneous social growth containing no contradictions, with each part vital to its overall well-being, hence thought and language, cognition and belief, fact, value, law and, livelihood, are all in healthy and harmonious balance.

Primitive culture is seen as leaving room for improvement; politically, the life of the stateless savage is seen as nasty, brutal, and short with its own innovative expression. Primitive culture is not inferior to modern civilization-just different. Actually, all cultures exist on a level plain. But right in the middle of this plain, there is a 'Big Ditch', which separates the tribal world from modernity. There are political differences between tribalism and civil society; there are economic differences between communalism and the way we live in a modern culture. There are cognitive differences in the way we think about cause and effect. To pretend that these differences can be 'reconciled' merely with enough goodwill is futile. They are not reconcilable, and they are not going to go away.

This is a wrong view that tribal cultures are 'closed,' in nature and the modern civilization is 'open' in type. The tribals have their own method of settling disputes and making justice. Actually the power of taboo means tribal cultures everywhere tend to be cognitively static, innovative in their way and incapable of adapting intellectual modernity.

Brief Chronology of this Vicinity:

- o c. 350 Kamarupa kingdom was established in Brahmaputra valley by Pushya Varman and the Indo-Aryan influences started.
- o c. 400 Sanskrit inscription was introduced to the Brahmaputra valley.
- o c. 350 to c. 1140 Four phases of Kamarupa kingdom.
 - c. 350 to c. 650 Varman Dynasty, capital Pragjyotishpura (Guwahati), Hindu Monarchs (Pushya to Bhaskar Varman).
 - c. 655 to 900 Mlechchha Dynasty, Hadapeshvar (Tezpur), Polytheism (Aboriginals' leader Salasthamba to Tyagasimha).
 - c. 900 to 1110 Pala Dynasty, capital Durjaya (North Guwahati), Hinduism (Brahma to Jaya Pala).
 - c. 1110 to 1140 Non-Dynastic Independent Kings and was also ruled by the chiefs of Bodo, Koch and Mech Tribes.

- o c. 1140 to 1200 Initial Development of three kingdoms.
 - Kachari Kingdom, capital Dimapur, Maibang, Khaspur. Dimasa Tribal Monarchy of Kachari ethnic group.
 - Kamata Kingdom, capital Kamatapur. Hindu Monarchy of Khen Dynasty.
 - Sutiya Kingdom, capital Swarnagiri, Ratnapur, Sadiya. Absolute Monarchy of Hindu Shaktism believers.
- o c. 1200 to c. 1800 Unification of Brahmaputra valley and ruled by Ahoms (Tai-speakers from Shan states of Burma).
 - Ahom Kingdom, 41 rulers for nearly 600 years maintained its sovereignty with Unitary States.
 - Successfully registered Mughal expansion in North-East India, though in 1618 Tripura was subjugated by Mughals.
 - Developed an economy which was based on strong cultivation in entire Brahmaputra valley.
 - In the 16th century suddenly it expanded and became multi-ethnic in character.
 - In the 17th century it faced a succession of Burmese invasions.
 - In the 18th century Moamoria Rebellion or Sattrahom Conflict on the issue of Paik System weakened the kingdom.
- o 1820s British colonial rule began in the Assam valley through the Yandaboo Treaty.
- o 1839 first armed conflict between Arunachal tribes and colonial government.
- o 1873 Inner Line Regulation demarcated British rule from tribal authority in the hills.
- o 1874 Arunachal hills incorporated into the Province of Assam as 'unadministered tracts'.
- o 1891 Manipur becomes state, where Meetei People of Sino- Tibetan language were lived along with the Nagas and Kukis.
- o 1897 First official colonial contact in the Apatani valley.
- o 1914 McMahon line drawn between India and Tibet/ China, and the British administrative consolidation process started.

- o 1935 Act of India makes Arunachal hills an 'excluded area'.
- o 1940s Semi-permanent government presence in Apatani valley.
- o 1947 Indian Independence.
- o 1948 Apatanis attack a government outpost near the valley.
- o 1949 The Princely State of Tripura and Manipur were merged with the Union of India.
- o 1950 Tibet/Assam/Medog Earthquake occurred on August 15, and 1526 people were killed.
- o 1951 Naga National Council or NNC (formed in 1940s) voted for a 'Free Sovereign Naga Nation'.
- o 1952 First General Election of India was boycotted by Naga National Council (NNC).
- o 1954 NEFA (North-East Frontier Agency) established to govern the Arunachal hills.
- o 1955 Assam Engineering College, the first engineering college in the North-East India, was established.
- o 1956 Naga National Council (NNC) formed a parallel government 'The Federal Government of Nagaland'.
- o 1958 Armed Forces Special Powers (Assam and Manipur) Act was passed in Indian Parliament and Mizo Hills was devastated by a great famine that was locally known is 'Mautam Famine'.
- o 1961 Mizo National Front (MNF) was born under the leadership of Laldenga.
- o 1962 Chinese invaded NEFA; Indian army arrived and stayed, and a long series of events triggered the Sino-Indian War.
- o 1963 Part of NEFA was given a new state of Nagaland.
- o 1972 NEFA was defuncted; Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram became Union Territories.
- o 1970s Donyi-Polo (revitalization) movement gained support from indigenous religions of Animistic and Shamanic type of the Tani and other Tibeto-Burman peoples of Arunachal Pradesh.
- o 1979 United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) was founded by Paresh Baruah in Sibsagar demanding sovereign Assam via an armed struggle, and was banned in 1990.

- o 1987 Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram became states, and the official Bodoland Movement for an independent state of Bodoland started under the leadership of Upendranath Bahma of the All Bodo Students' Union (ABSU).
- o 1988 Hindu temple was built in Hapoli.
- o 1990s Christian churches were built in Hapoli.
- o 2000 A number of racial attacks against Bihari community organized in Assam, Manipur and Nagaland.
- o 2003 Christian churches built close to Apatani villages.
- o 2004 Donyi-Polo hall built in an Apatani village.
- o 2007 Donyi-Polo halls built in three more villages.
- o 2012 Assam Violence (Between Bodos and Bengali/Hindi-Speaking Muslims).
- o 2014 Assam Fear (Between Bodos and Adivasi Tribal People).
- o 2018 People of this diverse region have a perceived feeling of neglect by New Delhi due to their peripheral situation and cultural differences.

Analytical Dimension

In the above chronology of events we see four phases of Kamarupa Kingdom, ancient Naga Kingdom, and Kampat Mizo settlements indicating changes in the socio-economic and cultural structure of everyday folklife. From pre-Ahoms stage to Ahom phase, slowly chieftdom was run under the dynasty rule. Distinction between low level urban settlements with village life was drawn in this period. Agricultural production also got acceleration. It was a phase, when the influences of Tibetan, Burmese and Hindu culture with Sanskrit or Indo-Aryan language, Tai-speaking Khamptis interacting sign/dialect, Tibeto-Burman language, and Sino-Tibetan language were accommodated with the Austro-Asiatic language or with other indigenous communicating sign/dialect.

Mughal invasion in Tripura germinated a new culture with new religious practices that had no major effects in a greater level on these hill provinces. But the British colonial rule with administrative consolidation opened the region and brought it closer to other parts of India and the world. Firstly, the extension of the British rule over the bordering tribal territory was marked by an exploiting feudal class, poor and helpless peasantry, universal slavery and a society

perpetually in distress. British rule controlled the area through different inner line of administrative work. Survey entailed birth of different districts. Secondly, on the social level British Government abolished age-old paik system which was based on a distinction between three social classes, viz. Kadi-paik, Chamua paik and Visaya/ Dangariyas. Thirdly, an introduction of ryotwari system, under which the peasants were required to pay land rent directly to the Government without any intermediary, initiated the role of collecting agents as self-employed tribal peasant proprietors and reshaped the services of slaves and the bonded labour. For this restructuring process big landlords and the nobles (Visaya/Dangariyas) were forced to sell their land.

Pre-British and British social positions were dialectically interrelated that initiated the emergence of a middle class (apart from tribal/racial difference) in Assam as a synthesis. Religious conversions and missionaries activities introduced three things: (a) New religious practices; (b) Bengali as a major language; and (c) Making of scripture over dialect. Agricultural productivity increased, but large scale tea plantation introduced a large scale internal and inter-territorial displacement. Acculturation, assimilation, and accommodation processes got acceleration in new work schedule with a new style of livelihood and a new monetary exchange system that replaced traditional reciprocity and redistribution processes.

After independence, on the basis of language, cultural identity and other rights, the process of state formation was going on to integrate North-east. Adi, Angami, Apatani, Boro, Deori, Garo, Kuki, Khasi, Mishing, Mizo, Naga, Nishi, Rabha, Rengma, Singpho, and other tribes are residing in this diverse region. So the integration process was not so easy in reality. Different bloody movements had occurred, where the leading roles are performed by different tribal groups of this hill province. Even now the movements are going on and as a result several ethnic conflicts are occurring and creating a fearful environment in North-east India. Albeit this perspective, it is also true that the diverse cultural elements give birth to a new dimension of economy that now becomes a form of state-festival with an institutional frame. Following table indicates state-wise list of festivals which are going to be lucrative business to tourism industry.

The Economy of Folkcult				
STATE	FESTIVAL	WHEN	WHERE	REMARKS
Arunachal Pradesh	Torgya	January	Tawang Monastery	Sacred Dance, Organized by Monpa tribe
Arunachal Pradesh	Reh	February	Talo, Amru, Dri Villages of Dibang Valley	6 consecutive days programme offering buffaloes to great mother Nanyilnyitaya
Arunachal Pradesh	Losar	End of February/ Early March	Tawang Monastery	New Year celebration of Monpa Tribe, & expression of North-East Indian Tibetan Culture
Arunachal Pradesh	Dree	July	Ziro, Subansiri District	Tamu, Metii, Danyi, Harming, These Gods are worshipped by Apatani Tribe
Arunachal Pradesh	Solung	July/August	Any Village of 'Adi' agricultural community	7 days programme with different names of each day
Assam	Dehing Patkai	January	Lekhapani, Tinsukia District	Festival of Dehing River, Patkai Range is fully organized by Department of Tourism, Assam
Assam	Maagh/ Bho gali Bihu	Mid January	Country side of each District	Bonfires feasting, buffalo fightings and pot breaking
Assam	Bohaag/Ron gali Bihu	Mid April	Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra Guwahati	Organized by the Assam Tourism Department
Assam	Ambubashi	Mid June	Kamakhya Devi Temple, Guwahati	4 days practice of Tantric cult and believe that Devi goes through her menstrual cycle
Assam	Kaati Bihu	Mid October	Country side of each District	Completion of paddy transplantation
Assam	Raslila	November	Garamur, Majuli River Valley	4 days Majuli festival is full of rich art & culture of Vaishnavs' cult
Nagaland	Hornbill	December, 1-7	Kisama, Kohima District	16 Tribes participate in this Festival
Nagaland	Sekrenyi	February	Angamis Village	10 days festival of well cleaning by all men of the village, last days are celebrating with dancing procession
Nagaland	Moatsu	May, 1-7	Ao Tribal Village	3 days festival to get preparation for harvesting by Ao Tribe
Meghalaya	Behdienkhlam	July	Jowai & Other Villages of Jaintia Tribes	3 days celebration of bumper harvest & to chase away the Demon of Cholera, Women do not participate
Meghalaya	Nongkrem	November	Smit, Shillong	5 days celebration of goat killing of Khasi Tribe, Dance dedicated to harvest thanksgiving
Meghalaya	Wangala	November, 7-9	Asanang, Tura	2 days festival of Garo Tribe, 100 Nagaras (drums) dance dedicated to Sun (God of fertility)
Tripura	Garia	April 7	Country side with tribal living	Sacrifice of cocks and Garia Dance with a Bamboo Pole
Tripura	Kharchi Puja	July	Old Agartala	Common practice of worship with a tribal origin
Tripura	Ker	July (fortnight of Kharchi Puja)	Each House	Traditional tribal festival with a deity of Vastu Devata with a Bamboo Pole
Manipur	Lai - Haraoba	May	Meiteis Villages	Celebration of the creation of universe and evolution of living planet by Meiteis People
Manipur	Kang Chingba	July (8days of Ratha Jatra)	Govindajee Temple, Imphal	Vaisnavism Practiced
Manipur	Heikru Hidongba	September	Sagolband, Imphal	Meitei calendar's first day celebration by King through prayer of God for the welfare of people
Manipur	Ningol Chakkonba	October-November	Each Family	Grand Feasts are arranged for Sisters at each Family Level
Manipur	Kut (Chavang or Khodou Kut)	November	Tribal Villages	Different Tribes of Kuki-Chin- Mizo groups
Mizoram	Chapchar Kut	March	Aizawl	Agricultural Festival participated by Different Tribes
Mizoram	Anthurium	September	Reiek Mountain	Organized by the support of Central Govt. of India and represents Mizoram's artifacts
Mizoram	Thalfavang Kut	November	Tourist Spots of each district	Completion of harvesting and Celebration with dance and sale of local handicraft & handlooms
Mizoram	Khuado Kut	November	In each Village	Mega feast at village level on the darkest night to push the evil spirit from village

The dimensions and directions of language and cultural change
There are seven dimensions and directions of change in the way of life of these tribal groups:

1. Biological Dimension - Direction of change is from Universalism to Particularism
2. Psycho-social Dimension - Direction of change is from Communitarianism to Individualism
3. Parxo-social Dimension - Direction of change is from Ascription to Achievement
4. Spiritual Dimension - Direction of change is from Outer focus to Internal focus of control
5. Ethno-lingual Dimension - Direction of change is from Synchronous time to Sequential time
6. Ethno-political Dimension - Direction of change is from Natural to Emotional
7. Technological Dimension - Direction of change is from Diffuse to Specificity.

Dimension & Direction-1: Biological Dimension: The gradual control and direction of racial mixture (the Mongoloids, the Indo-Aryans, the Australoids or Austric and the Dravidians) by conscious and invaded values, purposes and ideals that replace the mechanisms and procedures of tribal living, their languages and the domination of clan over societies. Racial hybridization constituted family life with a decrease in birth and death rates. Previous time the tribal people place a high importance on law by penal/repressive rules, values and obligations. Now they believe that each circumstance and each relationship dictate the restitutive rules that they live by. The changing direction is from universalism to particularism.

Dimension & Direction-2: Psycho-social Dimension: The structured and meaningful orientation of the tribal people towards their values, ethics, linguistic affinity, community feeling and taboos which have been restructured by new one. Tattoo marks one as human and signals social and clan connections. A tribal group tattooed on the face and body as a mark of honour. This body painting is "event oriented"; it marks a break from the everyday activities of the group. The paint symbolically sets the decorated person apart from his or her everyday self. Communitarianism is replaced by individual orientation. Previously the tribal people believe that the group is more important than the individual, but presently majority of educated tribal people believe in personal freedom and achievement. In this psycho-social dimension tattoo is becoming a fashion.

Dimension & Direction-3: Parxo-social Dimension: The functional orientation of tribal existence towards their family life, ways of getting mates, youth dormitory or 'Gotul', art and literature, dialect and discourses have changed and became commercialized. Previously tribal people believed that denizens should be valued by birth. Racial mixture constitutes hybrid social milieu. Power, potentiality and position

mattered within the cultural settings and the roles defined their behaviour. Presently they believe that denizens are what they do and worth accordingly. The new linguistic and cultural elements value modern economic performances.

Dimension & Direction-4: Spiritual Dimension: Art, myth, religion and morality embody the meaning and passion of human life and the impulsion and direction of change. According to tribal mythology, nature and their environment are the controllers of cosmic life. They are controlled/regulated by these supernatural/magical powers. Religious conversion made it possible to connect with English language, and for modernized urban settings tribal clans have now started to believe that they can control nature or their environment to achieve goals. Now they do not focus their actions on outer world. The direction of change is from an external focus of control to internal focus of control.

Dimension & Direction-5: Ethno-lingual Dimension: One's ability to learn a new language obviously opens minds to the ways of acquiring meanings and increases the opportunities for cross-cultural understanding. But when there is any compulsion and the presence of socio-cultural factors, then firstly, there works intolerance for ambiguity, and secondly, there occurs cultural shock. In north-east part the changing direction is from synchronous time to sequential time. Previously tribal people see the past, present, and future as interwoven period. They often work on several aspects at once. Now they like events to happen in order with a schedule appearance.

Dimension & Direction-6: Ethno-political Dimension: Ethnopolitics are specific in their traditional bonding with geopolitics. It is clear that this will be rather a long process, and its results depend largely on a whole series of questions connected with ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious orientation and identity for the very structure of a nation. Here the changing direction is from natural to emotional action orientation. It gets impetus after independence. Tribal people, in the past, make a great effort to control their emotions. Reasons influence their actions far more than their feelings. People do not reveal what they are thinking or how they are feeling. Now they want to find ways to express their emotions, even spontaneously, at everyday life. It is not natural; rather it is emotional in nature.

Dimension & Direction-7: Technological Dimension: Appearance of new community people within own territory opens new opportunities of (a) innovation; (b) use of tools; (c) learning and teaching from others to invent and use them. Before invasion of alien technology, the tribal people saw an overlap between their work and personal life. They used single tool for several purposes and believe that good relationships are vital to achieve group objective. Within market exchange they keep work and personal lives separate and do not maintain their relationships in a same manner, whether in social or in personal level. They believe that people can live without having a good relationship. This direction of change is from a diffuse to a specific dimension.

Causes and Consequences of Consolidation:

In spite of these several facets of change in tribal world, there still exist some spice elements that hold them altogether and maintain a consolidated state of belongingness. What are these causes?

Geographical isolation and lack of universal modern facilities are the main causes of survival of tribal cultural elements in North-East India. Maintaining rituals and socialization of new born in their age old indigenous traditions are other causes of this endurance. Hunting becomes a festival, not an action of everyday tribal life. Even now they maintain their clan boundaries. Lineal descent relations usually set this territory and may join forces in the face of Government policy. This clan based social relations meet certain basic human needs more effectively than liberal/non-clan-based democratic institutional structure.

The tribal identity tends to be collective. They take great pride in the accomplishment of their fellows and they share responsibility for failure. Interlocking kin associations with many people of a certain locality fit into value loaded actions from which they knew exactly who they are, and how they fit. Members of tribal society do as they are told because violators could pay a heavy penalty in term of ostracism or even violence. Uneven development and cultural domination help to consolidate tribal groups according to their cultural/ethnic identity.

Many tribes/clans physically mark their members and glorify their ethno-lingual connections. Presence of informal authority is another cause of surveillance. No quick intervention of 'state apparatus' in the dispute cases in community level happen. Primarily the problems are solved by the head of the group, and when the case is related to the evil spirit then the priest unravels the crisis. Some of the necklaces worn everyday by the women of the Subansiri, shown in the lithographs from the 1840s, were visible in the 1940s and even today.

In formal agriculture they introduce natural manure in the soil by growing alder, which is a non-leguminous plant, and that fixes atmospheric nitrogen through nodules which develop in the roots. Tribes who use this technique are equally adept in using the lower parts of the hill slopes with a high agricultural production. The savage kinds [clan and tribal] reproduce themselves spontaneously. Without conscious design, potential supervision, political surveillance, or special nutrition, they can adept themselves to survive and consolidate in the changing scenario.

Conclusion:

Today, 'tribalism' usually means ethnic 'divisiveness'. Diverse divisiveness is an exclusive feature of north-east India. The province of north-east tribal India is self-reproducing, and a network of changing linguistic communities framed by the social dominance of face-to-face integration, integrating communication in social media, and living in the world today. A dominant frame or habitus in tribal community, refers to a frame that imposes itself by a process of naturalization. The authority of monarchy - whether it be tribal-traditional, classical-traditional and,

even in increasingly trivialized ways, modern and postmodern monarchy - is at one level continuous with the customary modes of organization of kinship and genealogical placement. It emerged from tribal associations of lineage.

The concept of 'tribalism' begins to turn on a convention of self-naming. This has opened up the possibility of a postmodern relativism that says that you are part of a tribe if you name yourself as such. The question of self-naming is only one of the dimensions of community. Dominant authority crosses quite different relationships to embodiment and power - from tribal-traditional kings whose power is only partially lifted out of the organizational structures of kinship to postmodern monarchs where kinship determines only the genealogy of election and the stories of cultural legitimation. In postmodern monarchy, despite its abstraction as a pastiche of language games, still draws upon layers of the modern and traditional. In contemporary tribal life we find the assimilation of themes like, stone and wood, money and clock, book and computer, into changing but continuous cosmologies.

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